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ABSTRACT

Noting the large numbers of special education teachers who leave the profession during their first few years, this study surveyed 60 preservice special education teachers, student teachers, and first year teachers regarding their concerns about the first year of teaching. Leading concerns of all three groups included the following: effectively meeting all demands and roles of a special education teacher; managing classroom and student behavior; conducting an IEP meeting; and knowing how to complete IEP paperwork. This paper also includes the written perspectives of six respondents representing all three groups. (DB)

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WHAT PRESERVICE AND FIRST YEAR TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE

Introduction

During the first five years of special education teaching, up to 50% of all new teachers leave the profession (Ingersoll, 2001). During the past three years, approximately 50% of all new Utah special education teachers left during their first year of teaching. The number of leavers increased to 60% the second year and then leveled out the third year (Morgan, 2002). Why do so many beginning special education teachers leave the field? One answer may be the working conditions related to special education teaching--such as paperwork, challenging student behavior, a lack of materials and resources, and a lack of support--have been identified as a primary cause (Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Lenk, 1997). The question then becomes one of whether or not university teacher education programs are preparing preservice teachers to meet these demanding conditions.

Survey Process

To begin to address this question, a small group of undergraduate students at Utah State University (USU) decided to survey preservice special education teachers, student teachers, and first year teachers regarding their concerns as they anticipated going into their first year of teaching and how those concerns changed over time. The questions addressed what concerned them going into their first year of teaching; what types of supports they are expecting from the district and the school; and what areas they feel they need more preparation; and what they would like district and school personnel to know about them.

As we reviewed the answers from the survey we developed a more detailed survey from their responses. The survey was made more specific by listing specific concerns such as IEP paper work, organizing and filing state and federal paper work, scheduling the day for students, writing goals and objectives, and interacting with general educators. These changes helped us better assess what the preservice students were thinking, and thus improved the accuracy of the survey. During the development of the survey we wanted to understand how the preservice student felt. We also wanted to gain a better understand how the attitude may change over time by administering the survey to student teachers and first year teachers. Survey questions were the same on surveys for student teachers and first year teachers with a few additional questions about how their concerns have changed and what could have been done differently in their university classes to better prepare them to meet the demands special education teaching.

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The survey was given on a voluntary basis to all the students who are currently enrolled in USU special education program through preservice training and student teaching and those teachers who have graduated from USU and are currently in their first year of teaching. Participants were asked to answer the question given by rating their responses as (1) no concern, (2) concern, and (3) great concern. We asked the participants to rank their top five concerns based on the questions from the survey. A section was also provided to give participants the opportunity to add any other concern not listed. From this survey, we hope to be able to help the students address any concerns they have about moving to preservice. In addressing these issues, we hope that we can continually improve the preservice special education program at USU and thereby improve the likelihood that the preservice teachers will become highly effective special education teachers who stay in the field.

Survey Results

The survey population included current preservice students, student teachers, and graduates of the USU special education program who are first year teachers. The initial focus was preservice teachers and their concerns. We also wanted to see how those concerns had changed from student teaching to the students' first year of teaching. Approximately 60 participants responded: 6 first year teachers, 17 student teachers, and 36 preservice students.

Survey responses were tabulated, and the data analyzed. Participants rated their highest five concerns. The top three concerns were distinct, but the fourth and fifth concerns varied widely with multiple responses. The top three concerns are displayed below in Table 1. All groups rated the same concern highest: effectively meeting all demands and roles of a special education teacher. The full results will be tabulated and analyzed in the future.

Table 1. Top three concerns of survey participants as compared by group

Preservice Students	Student Teachers	First Year Teachers	Preservice Students	Student Teachers	First Year Teachers
<u>Top three concerns</u>			<u>Percentage</u>		
Effectively meeting all demands and roles of a special education teacher	Effectively meeting all demands and roles of a special education teacher	Effectively meeting all demands and roles of a special education teacher	88.2%	77.8%	83.3%
Conducting an IEP meeting	Managing classroom and student behavior	Managing classroom and student behavior	76.5%	47.2%	50.0%
Knowing how to complete IEP paperwork	Knowing how to complete IEP paperwork	Other—(testing, getting caught up, juggling it all)	52.9%	44.4%	50.0%

Participants provided comments about such things as experience, other concerns not addressed in the questionnaire, and how their concerns changed from preservice to student teaching and student teaching to their first teaching position as a special education teacher. While the majority of the participants had some type of experience working in a special education classroom, seven participants had no experiences or did not respond to the question. Experiences consisted of being a peer tutor during high school, having a sibling with a disability, or working in a classroom or for an agency. Many worked as volunteers with Special Olympics or within a church organization.

Participant comments about concerns not listed in the survey:

- "Finding time to do functional behavior assessments and set up behavior plans for severe behaviors."
- "Transition IEP meetings."

- *"Devising a curriculum that is in harmony with my core beliefs about education and people. Making a positive difference in the lives of my students."*
- *"Being appreciated and treated like a respectful person—a professional"*
- *"Paperwork—hard to get caught up on. Testing—also finding the time"*
- *"I am not worried so much about the first day of school but the few weeks that will follow when behavior problems start to show up."*

Additional questions were asked of the student teachers and first year teachers about how their concerns have changed; and what could have been done differently in their course studies to better prepare them for teaching. Responses to the question "Have your concerns changed from student teaching to your first teaching experience?"

- *"Less concerned about the paper work as I gain experience; it comes easier. Jumping through hoops."*
- *"Concerns pretty much same. Time management a problem, getting sufficient data collected, and ownership of special education students by regular education teachers still a problem."*
- *"Yes, there was a greater concern in scheduling and meeting the needs of all involved in each student's education."*

Responses to the question, "Have your concerns changed during student or first teaching assignment?"

- *"Somewhat. I now realize that although I've been well-prepared in my coursework, putting all of those things together in a "real" classroom is an overwhelming, but exciting challenge."*
- *"I had a wonderful cooperating teacher and she helped me to have confidence in my teaching. She really showed me how thing worked and answered all my questions."*
- *"There is so much to know about funding, paperwork, and scheduling students that I never realized...."*
- *"I am very concerned now with placing the students in the appropriate setting. I want the best level of support for them. I m also concerned with the level if accommodations for my students. How much should they be expected to do at grade level-since they will be expected to take grade level core tests?"*
- *"I've realized that a lot more goes into teaching than I knew before."*

Responses to the question, "What could have been done differently in your university special education training to better prepare you to meet the demands of special education teaching?"

- *"To role play IEP meetings with professors. Then they could have told us what went well and what didn't."*
- *"I personally needed just a little more instruction in all the paperwork and "reality" junk stuff that special education teachers are in charge of."*
- *"More explanation of how to determine what category a student falls into (classification). More review of paperwork."*
- *"I feel that I was well-trained and prepared to enter the classroom. I would have liked to learn more about specific disabilities and meeting the educational needs of students with those disabilities."*
- *"More large group behavior management in the severe program."*

Responses to the question, "What advice would you give to university students preparing to become special education teachers?"

- *"Take every assignment very seriously and as if you were doing it on your own as a teacher. Will you be able to do this independently? Approach your coursework through your practicum. That is where you gain real experience and can practice what you've been taught."*
- *"Work hard at school. If you can, don't work while you are in school. I didn't and I feel like I reaped some benefits because I was able to get the in depth knowledge of the theories behind educating students with disabilities. These theories, put into practice, make sense of the things I encounter in my job everyday."*
- *"To take it a day at a time and expect to be really busy and to rely on their supervisor and cooperating teacher. They are there to help you...also, don't procrastinate!"*
- *"Get as much out of the practicum as you can. Take as much responsibility as the teacher will allow in managing the classroom. Take initiative!"*
- *"Try to review everything you've learned especially about special education law."*

- *"Try to get as much experience as you can working in educational settings to better understand what is being taught in your university classes."*

Personal interviews

In addition to conducting the survey, we asked three USU students, one preservice student and two first year teachers, to write a personal perspective addressing their concerns about becoming a special education teacher and how those concerns had evolved through student teaching and into the first year of teaching. The first year teachers both teach in very different settings. One teaches in an urban high school classroom for students with severe disabilities. The other teacher works in a rural private school with students with mild/moderate disabilities.

Personal Perspective—Preservice mild/moderate disabilities teacher

"I hear, I forget. I see, I remember. I do, I understand." –Chinese Proverb. To be honest, I never wanted to be a special education teacher. I thought it just simply was not for me. As most entering freshman in college, the daunting question echoed in my thoughts, "What am I going to major in?" It took me a year and a half to decide after a close friend suggested that special education might be something I could possibly good at. When she first mentioned special education, I thought, "That is only for really unique, extremely kind and patient people like my sister-in-law, Jenny or my Aunt Rosie, not me!" Yet, as I considered all of my options special education just felt right. So, I transferred universities, and I entered the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation at Utah State University a year later. I am currently a preservice, undergraduate student. I will graduate with a dual major in severe and early childhood special education in the spring of 2004.

For the past 20 years or so I have been in a school setting. From preschool to the present, I have been a student. I have had the opportunity to play the role of teacher through informal settings, summer camps, and practical experience. Yet, I have never been THE teacher. My major concern right now as a preservice teacher is to be able to apply what is being taught in my university classes to when I am THE teacher. I truly desire to study well, read all of the chapters and articles and not do all my assignments last minute, but I'm a product of our school systems. Get the "A" and move on. I am stuck in the rut of sitting unengaged in hours of classes and simply trying to get through the day. There is simply no time to study all of the material and information we are supposed to learn. In addition, I realize that there is a difference in "learning" in school and retaining and applying it in the classroom.

As part of my preservice training, the professors require each student to spend an allotted amount of time in a local special education classroom. For me this experience has been the most valuable. From passively learning in the classroom, to observing cooperating teachers and having to execute teaching skills, I have a far greater understanding to what is essential in running a classroom. However, only a few hours a few days a week in the classroom there are many roles of being a teacher that I have yet to experience. As I picture myself in the classroom setting, I worry about managing the classroom, organizing the day, choosing curriculum and filling out paperwork appropriately. I'm scared with the thought of me being the one in charge and the one responsible for the students. But, I know that being scared is healthy and I am confident that in the future my apprehension will continually subside with more experience in the classroom.

Along with my apprehension, there are areas of teaching where I do feel more confident. Others have helped me to by pointing out my strengths as a leader and as a teacher. I am not worried about working with paraeducators, other teachers, administrators and parents. I've had many extracurricular and work experiences that have helped me understand social and collaborative skills to be applied as a teacher. Although, I am not perfect, I know that I do have skills that are to be used to help and assist others.

Overall, as most individuals enter a new field or stage of life, the questions remain, "Am I prepared? Have I learned all that I need to learn? Could I have done more?" and finally, "Where will I be in the next few years? I never thought that I wanted to be a special education teacher. But, I have grown to understand, it is just right for me.

Personal Perspective—first year teacher teaching in a mild/moderate class in rural private school

My early years of college were spent trying to discover what I wanted to specialize in to obtain my degree. I considered the worlds of computer programming, business, recreation, and of course, education. Because this was

such an important decision for me, I decided not to rush and earned an Associate's Degree in General Arts and Sciences. I transferred to Utah State University still unsure of what to study. I gathered information from various departments and seriously thought about what was best for me. For several weeks I was confident that I would someday work with computers and was anxious to begin taking courses. About one week later, a thought came to me so strongly that it made me change my mind completely. I remember telling myself, "I don't want to work with machines. I want to work with people." Since that self-discovery, I have not looked back or ever questioned my decision, and I graduated from USU in December 2002, with a dual major of Special Education and Elementary Education. Currently, I teach second and third grade at a rural private school.

Meeting expectations and addressing concerns are always on the mind of any individual involved in education. When I was a preservice teacher in the Special Education and Rehabilitation Program at USU, the biggest concern that I had was being able to know state and federal laws and comply with them. I also worried about correctly filling out forms, filing, and organizing what I records I had. I entered the program with the understanding that special education teachers must know what he/she and the students can or cannot do, and I wanted to obtain that knowledge in order to accurately fulfill my duties as an educator and develop the training necessary to do well.

My student teaching experience helped me gain a better understanding of what to do when working with special education law because I was able to fill out federal and state forms, conduct and attend Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings, and design curriculums that were based on the goals and needs of each of my students. I knew that there was still much to learn about the law, but I gained confidence because I was able to have hands-on experiences that enhanced the instruction I was receiving at USU. Concerns about behavior in the middle school setting taught me more about interventions and positive reinforcement, but I still feared that an intervention would not be effective or meet the needs of the target student. I started to feel the pressure that teachers often feel to effectively meet all the demands and roles of a special educator. I became discouraged with the many things that needed to be taken care of before I could even begin giving instruction and helping the students obtain the academic knowledge planned on their IEPs. The stress of paperwork, meetings, scheduling, and data collecting often took more time and effort than teaching. Although I understood that these issues needed to be taken care of, my true desire was to teach, and I was frustrated that everything else was taking precedence over that desire.

I still encounter the concerns mentioned previously, but I have a better understanding of what to do and how to address the situations that occur. Having a mild/moderate emphasis, I work with students that encompass a variety of learning disabilities. Much of my time is now spent learning about the different disabilities that students have and how to individually help the child succeed in school. My concerns have now shifted to wanting to be more educated in diagnoses, learning strategies, and medication so I can better understand the minds of my students and serve them more effectively. I know that this knowledge will be obtained as I continue to work with students. There is no possible way one can learn everything there is to know before entering the classroom, which is why I love teaching. It gives me the opportunity to be challenged as my students are every day.

Personal Perspective--first year teacher teaching in a severe classroom in an urban school

I graduated from the Utah State University Severe Special Education Program in December 2002. I began the Special Education program at Utah State University in fall 2001. As I taught in several practicum positions in different settings, I realized many concerns. For the most part, my concerns were focused on developing lesson plans, completing evaluation and assessments for students, and being able to develop individual curriculum for each student. Many of these were not required for me to be successful in the classroom but to be successful in my college coursework. During my preservice training, my efforts were focused mainly on one or two students in a classroom and developing behavior and academic programs for those students. I did not have the responsibility of managing the entire classroom.

During student teaching, many of my old concerns were resolved, and I noticed new concerns. For example, I began to understand that there isn't a need to develop a specific, individualized curriculum for each student, as I had done in my preservice training. There is no need to "reinvent the wheel." I learned to use many programs that have already been developed and rely on the developments that other teachers had made. My focus

during student teaching was directed more toward paperwork and the IEP process. I found it difficult to link the many components of assessment, data collection, goals, and curriculum together to form an Individual Education Program. However, I was very supported by my cooperating teacher and was able to learn how to do this. Another concern that emerged when I was placed in the more responsible role of student teacher was managing student schedules. The organization of managing the comings and goings of students with severe disabilities continues to be a time-consuming, laborious task.

In January 2002, I began teaching in a functional skills classroom for students with severe intellectual disabilities in a large urban high school. The special education department consists of four resource teachers, one learning center teacher and two (including myself) severe teachers. I am responsible for nine students, five of which are classified under ID. The others are classified as multidisabled. I am responsible for managing two part-time and two full-time aides in addition to fifty-four high school peer tutors. The largest concern that emerged in my first days of teaching is the management of aides and peer tutors. Management was not the subject of coursework during my preservice training and I spend a majority of my time managing and evaluating the personnel in my classroom. This is my greatest concern, as I am unable to fulfill my other responsibilities as a special education teacher if I have not managed my staff and support.

During the first month of my teaching career, I became involved in a legal situation. Although conducting meetings with lawyers and several district representatives was stressful, this situation resulted in a greater concern; the constant questioning of whether or not my lessons and files are in compliance with state and federal laws. The concerns that I had as a preservice and student teacher have been moved to the back burner as I strive to make my files and lessons consistent and in compliance with the laws. Other concerns that have developed during my first year of teaching include parent interaction and interacting with general educators. I believe these concerns will be resolved with experience, although there will be as many new concerns as there are new members of my teaching teams. I am gracious to be in a district where I have support from the special education and behavior specialists at the district level. Without that support, my concerns would be much greater.

What next?

There are a variety of directions to pursue with this information. The first step will be to conduct a more in depth analysis of the survey data to explore the results and what they might mean. Another step would be continue the survey process by expanding the survey sample and continuing to gather information from new teachers who are entering the field in a variety of settings and geographic locations. Another direction to pursue would be to follow new teachers into their second through fifth years of teaching when attrition for new teachers seems to be highest (Ingersoll, 2001; Morgan, 2002) and interview them to see how their concerns evolve and what they do to successfully cope with the challenges they face. In addition, new teachers who leave during the first five years could be interviewed to explore how their concerns changed and evolved to the point that they chose to leave special education teaching. Hopefully, the information gathered in this process could be incorporated into university preservice and district/school inservice training to better prepare and support special education teacher. The long range goal would be to increase the likelihood that this population of special educators would stay in the field.

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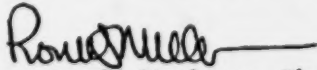
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